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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes a study of how students take part in the music classroom. The study consisted of: (1) a questionnaire, completed by students and teachers, that asked how students influence decisions in the music classroom; and (2) two case studies, one of a private primary school, the other of a public high school, that monitored student participation and influence in the music classroom. The study considered the effects of private and public schools, gender, social class, and student expectations of the music classroom. The paper addresses a teaching model, indicative of the case studies, that focuses on teaching of content and control of classroom interaction. Discusses the results. (BT)

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Democracy and Curriculum: How Students Take Part in Music Classroom

2001 AERA Annual Meeting, Seattle.

José Luis Aróstegui

Abstract

This is a summary of a research about how students take part in music classroom. Firstly, we have exposed the main results obtained starting by the surveys and the case studies we have made. The findings of the questionnaires consist of a restricted student participation due to their own condition of students. Besides, we have found some differences between private and public schools, and between student's gender too. With regard to the case studies, a teaching model distinguishes by two issues has been found: *teaching* which is focused on the contents and the *control* of classroom interaction. Different student's attitudes have been also found according to their gender, social class, and expectations on music and school. Finally, we conclude that a musical education made *from* music, no only *for* music, is supported as the best way to let the subject contribute to a global educational conception of schooling.

Article

This is a summary of a research into the way different participants in primary and secondary schools take part in their classrooms. It deals with the manner in which students are involved in their own learning, each group having its own characteristics, its own ways of proceeding, and a different significance of what student's empowerment should mean. It was conducted in the South of Spain, to be exact in the

Autonomous Community of Andalusia. This Autonomous Community has its own educational system distinguished by a strong cognitive psychological component. Such component establishes a curriculum mostly based on the practical paradigm. Primary schools are for students between the ages of 6 and 12 and Secondary schools for those between 12 and 18. Schooling is compulsory until the age of 16. The main aim of this study was to contribute to our knowledge of the conditions, reasons and ways in which students take part in curricular relationships along their compulsory schooling, in order to improve democratic culture, analysed from a musical education point of view.

A varied research methodology has been used: quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (case studies). The first one consists of a questionnaire passed to students and teachers from each educational level we are interested in. In primary schools, there were 24 items that were divided into four groups according to their purpose of inquiring how students can have influence on decisions taken: (1) in classes; (2) during activities; (3) about the methodology; (4) and about the evaluation. In secondary schools, there were 42 items, divided into seven groups: it was considered according to the same points as in primary schools, with the addition of three other areas: (1) about the subject at the beginning of the school year; (2) about the working party; (3) and about discipline. The second research method was composed of two case studies. The first one was studied in a private primary school situated in a slum quarter on the outskirts of a town, and the second one in a public High School situated in the town centre. In both studies our case was a group of students in music class, and the main issue was how students take part in that context.

In the next two sections of the article we have included the main data obtained by descriptive and inferential statistic, as well as an exposition of the negotiated report of each case. And, in the last section, the conclusions we have arrived to, according to our data, about the role of music in education.

Students in a lower position because of their own students condition: generalising from the questionnaires

The main results of the survey in primary schools can be summarized as a restricted student participation, as well as a teacher work starting from the practical paradigm, that is, based both on their teachings and on their unilateral control of the process. This explains why students have answered that they really take part in class. At the same time, they consider that teachers mostly make decisions. For example, chat and movement in music classroom is under control of adults. Students do not have the power to make any suggestion on methodology or evaluation.

On the other hand, music is perceived by students quite differently if we compare it with the other subjects, because music is less open than the others. This could be explained by bearing in mind that music is taught by a different teacher, just like physical education and foreign language. Students of these ages are used to work with their generalist teacher. They might feel intimidated by their lack of intimacy with their music teachers. Besides, music has been gradually implemented into the Spanish curriculum only since 1990 (before there was no music education in practice). That is, music teachers have less experience than most of their colleagues. So, they will probably try to exert a bigger control over their students. Unlike music, drawing and physical education are more open subjects, because students are allowed to take part more often.

In secondary schools, answers indicate a similar tendency: students say they can ask anything at any moment, and overall they feel there is a good atmosphere in the classroom. Nevertheless, most of the items tend to reveal a negative response (for instance, they cannot give their opinion about subjects) or without agreement among them (e.g., when they are asked if it is necessary to have the authorization from the teacher to talk, they answer almost by equal to the four options). On the other hand, the peculiar character that music has in primary schools does not appear in this level, since music differs from the other subjects just in two items. The reason seems evident: in Spanish secondary curriculum every subject is taught by specialist teachers, so music is not an exception in this educational level. In addition, students consider there are more chances for taking part in physical education and in religion/ethic (students have to choose between one of them), whilst physics, chemistry, and technical drawing come to be the most rigid subjects.

Referring to the other factor considered, some significant differences have been found between the old and the new educational system implemented since 1990. Those differences appear just in eight items, and always in favour of the most recent curriculum, especially in a greater use of working parties. There appears a similar situation concerning the centres locations: students in rural schools answer just a little bit favourable than their colleagues in urban ones.

Nevertheless the kind of centre constitutes the main factor: in primary education, public school students give an answer quite more favourable in 12 items (50%), an answer mainly located in those items which refer to a greater intervention in classes. However just the opposite situation appears in secondary education: differences appear in 13 items (31%) which, except for one question, are in favour of

private centres. If we relate this point to the absence of significant differences related to social class, and to the absence of correlation between this one and the centre ownership, we can conclude that at least these two partially different educational concepts arrive equally to the whole population.

Speaking of student characteristics, only a few questions have been influenced by gender. We understand this has been due to girls. For example, they answer they *never* can go out of the classroom when it is necessary, while boys in the same groups answer they can leave *from time to time*. Anyway, age comes to be the key: students are in a lower position just because they are students. This could explain to us why there appear no significant differences when they are asked about the evaluation, and about what occurs in class: teachers are not interested in talking to them about these questions.

Teaching and control in class: go deeply into the context through case studies

Discussing the case studies, in the first one the teacher used clearly the practical paradigm, distinguished by two issues. Firstly, *teaching:* she tries to motivate her students in order to make them learn musical concepts. Secondly, *control:* when her proposals do not work as she expected, she must exert an authority over students to avoid noises and distractions. The teaching facet was perceived in her interest to find interesting material and resources for her classes. The control one was perceived in her scolding when her teaching was not interesting for students. As a consequence of their lack of interest, they answered with their own resistance strategies. Basically, their strategies consisted of making a racket whenever possible, because feeling of freedom is more important for them than their interest in music. For instance, when they were

learning a dance in which they needed to choose another person at the end of the musical phrase, they gradually forgot what they had to do, and focused just on the game. Likewise, students also avoided taking part in any new activity until it became well known. They were more interested in the opinion the teacher could have of them than in learning something new. Teaching and control aspects were clearly perceived by these 9-10 year-old students, as it is shown in this excerpt from the observation diary:

> Before the beginning of the class, many boys and girls are making a racket. Three of them come to me:
>
> 1 Teacher, won't you give them a talking-to?
>
> O No, I won't. Why? Do you find incorrect what they're doing?
>
> 1 Yes, sure, they're making a lot of noise and I don't understand why you don't give them a talking-to.
>
> O What's the matter? Do I have to give a talking-to because I'm the teacher?
>
> ALL Of course!!
>
> O Well, I don't.
>
> 2 You just teach? Don't you scold anybody?
>
> O No, I don't.

It could be said louder, but not clearer. The teacher's roles are to teach and to give a talking-to. On the other hand, there was not an equal relationship between students because of their gender. For instance, they never chose a mixed pair during activities, and boys took part in class more frequently. As the teacher said, "girls are more shy. Boys take part better". However, she perceived those differences as *natural*, and so, as inevitable. Consequently, she did not anything to solve the problem.

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Their belonging to a low social-class implied an inequality too. This can be perceived in the attitude of a student reflected in classroom interactions, when he tried to get the others to pay attention to him. Consequently he was considered the worst of the group. But the influence of social class was mainly perceived when they participated in activities outside the centre, particularly when they took part with other schools of the town in an educational concert performed by the local orchestra, or in a Carroll competition (in which they also took part). In both situations they learned they were at a disadvantage when the teachers were more concerned with the possible scolding of other colleagues to their students than with a real misbehaving of them. In this point, teachers were conscious of the problem, and so they tried to avoid by all possible means the assumption by students that they were inferior.

With regard to the secondary case study, this is also distinguished by a non-equal relationship among students because of their gender. This leads to a minor intervention of girls during classes, as well as a male control of classroom space. The following excerpt from the interview we had with a group of girls clearly shows this point. They were asked about why they do not ask questions in class:

Girls You are embarrassed [...]. You are ashamed to ask [...]. Sometimes you are embarrassed because of the people who understand what's been explained. Perhaps you haven't understood something, and they say: *"Come on! Don't be silly! It's easy!* [...]. That's it.

O Who says that?

Gs People... Very often, you know... They say: *"It's easy!"*

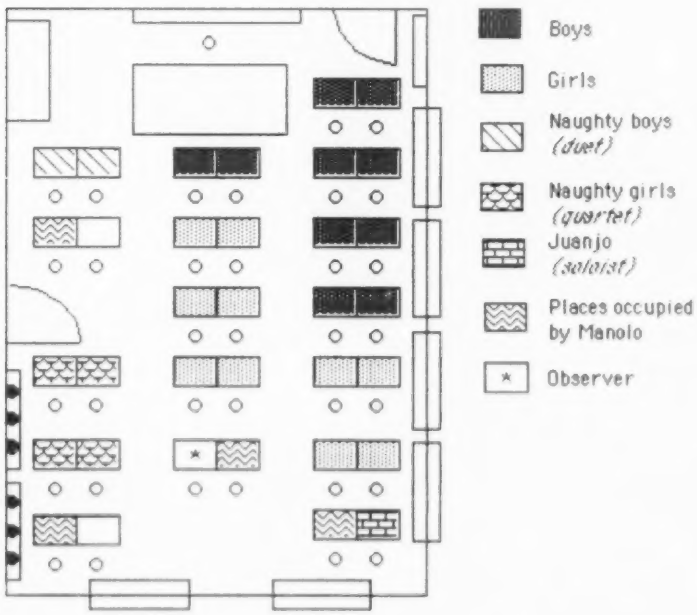
O But, what do you mean by *people*? Are you talking about your male classmates?

Gs Yeah [...]. Even when you know it's a joke, but perhaps...

O But, has anybody ever said that? Has anybody ever told you: *"Oh, how clumsy!"* or *"How silly!"* or something similar?

Gs No, *"How clumsy"*, no, but perhaps they begin by: *"It's easy! You have to understand it!"* [...] *"How is it possible you didn't get it?"*

Of course this is not natural attitude in girls, this is due to a learnt behaviour before their coming to the secondary school. Their male classmates neither do anything special for these girls to feel that inhibition, except for reproducing the more incisive attitude that has also been transmitted to them. In this sense, it is also remarkable where they were seated in the classroom, as it is shown in the following graphic:



Most of the boys were seated at the front and right area of the classroom, while the girls mainly occupied the central column, and always seated behind the boys. The *naughty* students chose the left side of the classroom. The boys were also distributed in the front and girls in the back. So, we concluded that males dominate the space. Vertically, because the first row is exclusively occupied by the boys. Horizontally, because it looks like the girls always occupy the places behind them, even when it seems there are another criteria in the distribution of space, like their attitude and expectations in class. Finally, there were two boys that they were not

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so integrated into the group. One of them was usually seated at the right and back of the classroom, and the other one did not have a defined place for seating.

However, the place occupied by each group of students was not the only difference among them. Besides their gender, their naughty or unnaughty attitude, and their integration into the whole group, different cultural characteristics were also perceived. One of the main characteristics was their different musical preferences. The main group, and specially the girls, liked the *Spice Girls*, the musical group in fashion at the moment. The *duet* preferred music for bands, because one of them belonged to his village's band. The *quartet* of girls rather liked *flamenco* music. The *soloist* Juanjo enjoyed playing and listening to *Heavy Metal* music, and the other one liked *Bakalao* music, a sort of disco music very popular in Spain among certain young groups related to drugs. This means that cultural values of music prevail over its own objectivity. Music defines their belonging to a concrete cultural subgroup just like their clothes, language or habits. This is probably the reason why they showed so much resistances when the teacher tries to talk about *their* music.

With regard to the teacher, he used a teaching model quite similar to the one explained in the other case study. His didactic approach is based on his control of the educational process and his teaching too, prevailing control over teaching, with the consequent resistance strategies elaborated by students. Student teachers in this group during the first weeks of the school year used the same didactic approach. Nevertheless, there was a warm relationship with students. They thought they had learned more just because they had more confidence in these teachers. As one of the students said: "*if you have confidence in the 'person' who is teaching you: you understand many more things!*" So, it is clear the priority of a good atmosphere in

classroom over the transfer of contents. That is, the process is over the product in an effective education.

Conclusions: The inherent relationship among music, society and education

According to all the data gathered, it is concluded how teachers are interested in letting know their students what the musical meaning is, that is, the musical objective knowledge. However, this means to focus on achieving a product to the detriment of the educational process. This perspective also implies to deny there are social values linked to music, so that it makes music preferences to be conditioned to his or her belonging to a concrete social group. In other words, students are being educated just *for* music, instead *from* music too. So, a positivist conception of music education is over another which considers music as a way to understand the world.

But music is not only an objective product. As Adorno (1976) says, "above all, music is indelibly a matter of the mind [...]. Its preparation has been ideological from the start" (Adorno, 1976, p. 61). This implies people rather like a certain kind of music according to their cultural conditioning, that is, according to their gender, their social class, or their race, among other factors. Denying or recognizing this point carries out to educate *for* music or *from* music. That also means a different kind of curriculum in arts:

> There is a vast difference between the view that there is a single universal truth that provides answers for every situation and the view that life is a continual inquiry and we are charged to construct meaning and discover our own truths. Both views [...] hold many implications for the arts and for education. In one view, our task is to study

> what is already given. In the other, our actions, perceptions and thoughts actually shape the world (O'Fallon, 1995, p. 22).

This last perspective is complementary rather than contradictory with regard to the dominant scientific point of view. It emphasizes the experience of each student in the school in order to let them assume that all the human knowledge is constructed by ourselves, due to this the importance for promoting the critical thinking. A music education made *from* this subject might contribute to this purpose. On the contrary, we will collect the results we are sowing: *high* music is related to the academic knowledge, which belongs to a selected minority. At the same time, *low* music is related to the experiential knowledge of students, appearing both *high* and *low* concepts as opposed rather than the two sides of the same thing (Best, 1996).

On the other hand, it is curious to check how to focus on the product carries out the primacy of something external to itself, since control prevails over teaching, and that supposes students are not the stars of their own learning. According to the collected data, it is clear they are allowed to take part always... always there is no conflict with teachers' interests. However if students cannot take part as they should, they will not be able to learn how to participate in society; their training as citizens who can live in a real democracy is reduced in the name of other interests which have nothing to do with them. That is why we should not educate just *for* democracy, but also *in* democracy. This means we ought not to worry anymore about contents but about how they could look for and choose those contents which let deconstruction and later reconstruction of experiential knowledge of each student by himself or herself. This becomes useful because, as Pérez Gómez (1994) says, this kind of scholar experience will let students to grow up in autonomy and critical thinking as a way to face their own individual existential problems, as well as those of their society.

In other words, by focusing on contents, teachers forget what happens with students and considers them equally. This is probably the reason of the primacy of control over teaching, because the logic of each subject is over what each student needs and demands. But if it is supposed they are equal, whether the teacher likes it or not, the consequence is the legitimacy of injustice, because treating equally what it is unequal obviously constitutes something unfair. In fact, this is the concept of democratic justice. So, content's teaching should be in function of student's learning, and not on the contrary as it usually happens. Of course, knowledge still has indeed a very important role in education, but not the same contents for everybody. Contents should be selected according students neediness', even more in the society of information where we live. Nowadays, the question is not to know everything (something impossible even in a very concrete branch of knowledge!), but to search for and to select the information we need (Flecha, 1997).

Nevertheless while we keep on thinking about contents in the name of a supposed objectivity of knowledge, whether we like it or not, we are transferring to our students the neo-liberalism values. So, they learn to use a double moral: what you think and what you say. They learn to consider exchange value over usage value, that is, for them meritocracy and qualifications are over learning, as the image of wage-earning work. They learn to consider training work as a more important job than the one of citizen training. They learn to willingly accept an authority, if teachers get to connect with students, or unwillingly if they are obliged to impose their own criteria in class. They learn to think about the achieving of a product, instead of thinking about the living of the process they are making. And finally they learn to split experiential and academic knowledge into two separated worlds, as it happens with private and public ambits in society.

Unfortunately, these are not democratic values in a full sense, and so they are against the labour committed to the compulsory school in a democracy, that is, to train people in order to enable them to live in democracy, to enable them to take part in the *res publica*. And it is here where music can do a lot, making things evident. For instance, why it is more and more common to use a background music (we usually hear it but we do not listen to it) not only in films, but in documentaries, and even in news, sending a message not explicit but functional. Or why melody, rhythm, texture and structure are rather better in a Brahms, Errol Garner, or Camaron de la Isla (flamenco music) pieces than those broadcasted by most of radio and TV stations. It is not a question of preferences, but a question of understanding contradictions and lies that the first music quoted faces up, and the second ones hides.

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